

Slavery at the End of the Colonial Period

Thomas Anburey



OVERVIEW

The following description of slavery as it existed at the end of the colonial period comes from Thomas Anburey, a British soldier who, after General John Burgoyne's surrender to the Americans in 1777, was held as a prisoner of war in Charlottesville, Virginia, until the end of the Revolution. He published this account of his experiences after returning to Great Britain.

GUIDED READING As you read, consider the following questions:

- Whom does the author think is responsible for the horrendous treatment of slaves?
 - What do you think is the average British citizen's view of slavery in America?
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The whole management of the plantation is left to the overseer, who as an encouragement to make the most of the crops, has a certain portion as his wages, but not having any interest in the negroes, any further than their labour, he drives and whips them about, and works them beyond their strength, and sometimes till they expire; he feels no loss in their death, he knows the plantation must be supplied, and his humanity is estimated by his interest, which rises always above freezing point. . . .

They [the slaves] are called up at day break, and seldom allowed to swallow a mouthful of homminy, or hoe cake, but are drawn out into the field immediately, where they continue at hard labour, without intermission, till noon, when they go to their dinners, and are seldom allowed an hour for that purpose; their meals consist of homminy and salt [pork], and if their master is a man of humanity, touched by the finer feelings of love and sensibility, he allows them twice a week a little fat, skimmed milk, rusty bacon, or salt herring, to relish this miserable and scanty fare. The man at this plantation, in lieu of these, grants his negroes an acre of ground, and all Saturday afternoon to raise grain and poultry for themselves. After they have dined, they return to labour in the field, until dusk in the evening; here one naturally imagines the daily labour of these poor creatures was over, not so, they repair to the tobacco houses, where each has a task of stripping allotted which takes them up some hours, or else they have such a quantity of Indian corn to husk, and if they neglect it, are tied up in the morning, and receive a number of lashes from those unfeeling monsters, the overseers, whose masters suffer them to exercise their brutal authority without constraint. Thus by their night task, it is late in the evening before these poor creatures return to their second scanty meal, and the time taken up at it encroaches upon their hours of sleep, which for refreshment of food and sleep together can never be reckoned to exceed eight.

When they lay themselves down to rest, their comforts are equally miserable and limited, for they sleep on a bench, or on the ground, with an old scanty blanket, which serves them at once for bed and covering, their cloathing is not less wretched, consisting of a shirt and trowsers of coarse, thin, hard, hempen stuff, in the Summer, with an addition of a very coarse woollen jacket, breeches and shoes in Winter. But since the war, their masters, for they cannot get the cloathing as usual, suffer them to go in rags, and many in a state of nudity.